

“European Sustainability Berlin 07”

Discussion Paper II

Stimulating informed debate: Sustainable Development Councils as an organised form of civil society

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German Council for
S U S T A I N A B L E
Development

How to use this paper

This discussion paper shall provide guidance for the second breakout session of the ESB07 conference. The breakout will discuss:

(1) Status:

What are the tasks and capacities assigned to councils, and what do they deliver? When and how can SD councils assume these roles particularly well or particularly poorly? – Discussed in parallel groups focussing on SD councils as

- advisor,
- agent, and
- communicator, respectively.

(2) Outlook:

What's the trend? What ought to be done? What would be a successful path? What is the challenge ahead? – Discussed in parallel groups focussing on SD councils as

- advisor,
- agent, and
- communicator, respectively.

The paper provides input into this discussion. It displays what action is currently being taken by National Councils for Sustainable Development. These actions differ in scope, purpose, and outreach. It is the first time this action puzzle is being compiled, and best-practise approaches of SD councils can now be discussed. Participants of the sessions may find reference for further thinking, in particular as regards discussing “outlooks”.

Additionally, annex I contains background information on councils' working mechanisms. The questions raised here might be inspiring for any of the three breakout groups, but particularly interesting for the second (SD councils as agent).

The Discussion Paper II is a summarised version of a background paper prepared for the EEAC Working Group Sustainable Development, based on an empirical study in 14 member states.

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1. Sustainable Development Councils (SDCs): coming into being

The Brundtland Commission was the first to introduce the idea of establishing national councils or ombudsmen, underlining "making informed choices" (chapter 11), and with this the participation of the private sector, science and civil society organisations (then: NGOs).¹ But whereas the Commission advocated this with the purpose of representation of interests of present and future generations, the SD councils established nowadays tend to not follow the idea of a formal representation.

Also the Agenda 21 stresses the importance of engagement of society and involvement of what was there defined as 'major groups' in SD policies and processes. Stimulated by this call, national governments have established SD councils.² Whilst the Agenda 21 also had a concept of a more formal representation, most of the SD councils as we know them today rather follow the aspiration of fostering dialogue for SD among stakeholders, and between stakeholders and government, as well as monitoring progress and encouraging initiatives.

In Europe the call of Agenda 21 fell on grounds of already existing participatory practice and mechanisms or institutions for policy advice.³ In some countries, such as UK and Germany, there were scientific advisory councils for environmental and related policies, preparing advice in a more academic way.⁴ In both cases a stakeholder oriented SD council was created in addition. Some countries with a social partner tradition (often institutionalised as social-economic council), some of which also already had policy advisory councils (e.g. the Netherlands, Ireland), either established an SD council in addition, with this special remit (e.g. Belgium, Ireland, later also Austria), or created, in parts temporary, bodies for certain tasks⁵. Most of the existing policy advisory bodies have taken up the SD challenge by re-adjusting, but not changing their mission. Other countries "were able" to start from scratch and created councils for SD and/or environment, with the advising and/or increasing involvement task (e.g. Portugal, Hungary, France, Spain, Slovenia, Croatia). Finland was the only country that did not follow the model of an independent SD council, but the model of a platform for dialogue between government and stakeholders, and the government coordination task in one (see ch. 4.1). This was later followed by some accession countries, of which nowadays the council in the Czech Republic still seems to operate⁶.

¹ Discussing how the legal rights of (future) generations could be secured, it says: " ... *the wide variation in national legal systems and practices makes it impossible to propose an approach that would be valid everywhere. Some countries have amended their basic laws or constitution; others ... may wish to consider the designation of a national council or public representative or 'ombudsman' to represent the interests and rights of present and future generations*" (Chapter 12, paragraph 84).

² In some developing countries however, these initiatives have over time in quite a few cases stalled again, for reasons of governance and politics. One practical factor has supposedly been that councils have been overloaded with tasks and capacity building has not followed. Also the fact that these councils, as novel institutions, unavoidably operate in a kind of "trial and error" mode, contributed to petering out or termination. These experiences are valuable everywhere, when establishing remits and modes of operation of SD councils.

³ For overviews see Niestroy (2005): *Sustaining Sustainability – a benchmark study on national strategies towards sustainable development and the impact of councils in nine EU member states*. EEAC series, Background study No.2. Lemma, Utrecht; Niestroy (2005): *The network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC)*, elni review 1/2005: 53-60.

⁴ As reaction to Agenda 21 Germany first continued with its expert advice tradition and established a "Scientific advisory council for global change".

⁵ E.g. Sweden a Commission for Local Agenda 21, the Netherlands a body for improving development aid, which is called national SD commission (NCDO).

⁶ The Czech Council is fittingly called "Government Council for SD", and has a composition of around 50/50 government and stakeholder/academics. The "Government Council for SD" of the Slovak Republic in contrast is "the key government coordination mechanism", (almost) exclusively composed of government and state agency members, with a "Working group for SD", where also non-governmental actors are meant to be included.

The new EU Sustainable Development Strategy, adopted by the European Council in June 2006, in paragraph 43 attributes to National Sustainable Development Councils the task and capacity of:

- stimulating informed debate;
- assisting in the preparation of national SD strategies;
- contributing to national and EU progress reviews;
- increasing the involvement of civil society and
- better linking different policies and policy levels.

In its policy guiding principles, the Strategy also includes the aim to enhance the involvement of citizens, businesses and social partners⁷. The governance chapter points out the importance of education for fostering behavioural change and increasing social capital, emphasises the need for communication, mobilising actors and multiplying success, calls upon "business leaders and other key stakeholders ... to engage in urgent reflection with political leaders" and "welcomes civil society initiatives which aim at creating more ownership for sustainable development". For fostering the former a proposal is announced for 2007, and for the latter the EU commits itself to "intensify dialogue with relevant organisations and platforms that can offer valuable advice".

2. Tasks and capacities of SD Councils

In general, for *SD strategies and policies* the following capacities can be identified:

- Long-term vision and principles, and giving a long-term perspective and framework for SD initiatives and investment,
- Political and societal leadership (i.e. government, parliament, organised civil society and private sector),
- Coordination of government policies (overall strategy and sectoral strategies and policies),
- Stimulating and fostering the involvement and engagement of civil society, communicating SD, encouraging and bringing together the range of activities,
- Mechanisms to address and resolve conflict of opinions and interests,
- Organising learning processes.

These mechanisms may be organised and assigned differently in different countries, i.e. various institutional arrangements are conceivable and do exist. However, some of the tasks itemised above are internal to government, in particular the coordination of policies and giving a framework, some are to be done by government as well as civil society and the private sector (leadership, long-term perspective, conflict resolution, organising learning processes), and some are more on the societal side (stimulating further involvement), which may be supported and/or also done by governments.

This distribution of capacities is reflected in the *missions of SD councils*, which may be summarised under the headers policy advice (2.1), agent / dialogue facilitation (2.2) and communication / stimulating involvement (2.3). For each of these capacities three facets may be distinguished, though they overlap: an internal component, i.e. relating to everything that happens within the council, an intermediate sphere, i.e. all activities that derive from their position between government/state and society and their freedom to address, discuss with and involve all Ministries and other institutions at all levels, as well as an external component referring to reaching out to a wider audience, both in communicating and in involving.

The following table illustrates the capacities of councils by highlighting their "core" dimensions (in bold).

⁷ With apparently the role of (individual) businesses is emphasised as "social partners" usually includes trade unions and business associations.

Table 1: Key tasks and capacities of (SD) councils and the overlapping facets

	Advice	Agent	Communication
Internal	Agenda setting	Internal processes and work style: How to get to advice	Decisions on communication strategy and actions
Intermediate	Discussion with other parties during the process of preparing advice	Council members to cover the span between their organizations and deliberations in council	(e.g. designing a consultation process with other parties)
External	Communicating and discussing final advice	Council members carry joint views into their organization; Discussion with other parties during the process of preparing advice	All other communication activities beyond discussing advice

2.1 Giving policy advice

Councils are established to give advice to their government on SD policies, usually (also) related to the national SD strategy. This task stands to the background of a desired increase of the knowledge base for policy making. Similar to classical expert councils the more societal oriented councils also provide for knowledge transfer from science to policy making, as advice is meant to be evidence based and scientific input is sought. With the emphasis on civil society views in the councils though, governments do not listen to a "pure" scientific knowledge brought together in an interdisciplinary way, but to a politically processed essence of societal knowledge and expertise.

Advice is primarily, but not exclusively, directed to the government, and also includes an involvement in monitoring the national SDS. All councils in the EU may give initiative advice (on top of the advice explicitly requested by governments). In some countries governments are obliged to request advice, and also to officially answer to the recommendations.

Councils usually give input during the strategy development, comment on progress reports, sometimes by involving wider circles, for example by organising workshops etc. Advice is given on any policies considered as important and/or contentious. With this councils are able to show a kind of political leadership and

- keep the overall issue on the agenda and fill it with seriousness, get others to act (see also below),
- are reminders of the integrated and/or "holistic" view and the long-term perspective, and with this better able to identify forgotten or neglected issues, and finally they are
- able to reply to issues raised by the government, tackling contentious policy issues, hot topics, that may prepare and/or add extra value to government's engagement.

Agenda setting as the internal component is key for the advisory capacity, while dialogue with institutions during the phase of developing an advice is the intermediate component, as a core part of the agent capacity, and discussing the final advice is the external component, part of the communication task.

Currently these steps are predominantly being taken separately. However, there is apparently a trend that tries to combine all three steps or "facets" into what could be perceived as an advisory "learning loop". In that sense, the communication task would collect reflections and soundings on the effectiveness of the original advice, and would lay grounds for the council to possibly fine tune the previous advice or add new items.

2.2 Acting as agent and facilitator

Getting to advice – be it a consensus type joint advice or a split vote - is preceded by debate in the council and processes for achieving agreements, which is in itself a manner of mutual learning and hence capacity building, also referred to as building of social capital. The council with this acts as an agent ⁸ for dialogue among societal stakeholders, between sectors, organisations and interests, usually in combination with scientific input.

There is an internal process aspect to this capacity, which is strategically allowing for face-to-face-deliberations among council members with background in different civil society organisations ⁹. The main effect of stimulating deliberation and crossing borders and horizons, though, is the intermediate component, which is in fact the core of an SD council's existence and makes it rather unique: the vision and assumption, that stakeholder dialogue "among one another", in a certain style of provided openness, bears a potential for innovative thoughts, ideas, approaches, proposals etc. It creates a "unique selling position", and if a meaningful joint opinion is achieved, this adds some weight to the recommendations.

This situation hence provides for a kind of "higher level" aggregation of opinions and knowledge (compared to the simple aggregating of individual civil society organisations). The face-to-face deliberation is a value added to the concept of civil society. For civil society the regular way of addressing the public opinion is via stirring up the media, providing meaningful images and going for the headlines rather than marked by consensus building in face-to-face experience. This is an achievement of open and democratic societies. Councils are adding value to this by opening an additional field of opinion making, which can be of great value when highly complex matters and so-called "unstructured problems" such as burden sharing for climate action or change of production and consumption patterns are at stake.

Councils also elaborate and display to government and society either possible compromise/consensus lines and/or the conflict lines in society, - the former with a potential of them going beyond what may be achieved in traditional political negotiations.

With this, they are a "one shop one stop" contact point for the civil society angle on SD for the government and other actors (e.g. also from outside the country). It does not replace consulting with individual organisations, but it is effective to have the key views brought together and, hopefully, integrated. This also applies the other way round.

Relating to the agenda setting capacity, it is also beneficial to have civil society together in an SD council, because individual organisations usually do not have "SD" as their figurehead, and often also not on their agenda: besides historical reasons, probably because the field and approach is not distinct enough for providing a good profile for a CSO. ¹⁰

The external component of the agent capacity is, if and when council members carry views concluded in the council to their own organisation and elsewhere ("snowball effect" in a wider sense), and if councils invites other organisations already when preparing an advice, which includes government units and other levels (regional, local), and involving different Ministries in projects. Councils try to overcome deadlocks of each party passing the buck to another, trying to build up critical mass and "tidal power" for issues.

⁸ "Agent" means that a council is neither a negotiator nor mediator of interests and positions (in terms of arbitrating disputes), nor a mere facilitator or moderator of dialogue.

⁹ "Civil society organisation" (CSO) is chosen here instead of other available terminology (like interest groups, stakeholders) because of its broader meaning and absence of specific connotations, which can turn out to be confusing.

¹⁰ Such experience was for example made in the Netherlands' peer review (cf. Background report 2006: http://www.rmno.nl/files_content/Rmno%201207%20Peer_4.pdf , plus Annex on civil society).

2.3 Communication and stimulating involvement

Besides inherent communication activities, around half of the councils have explicit tasks to

- communicating SD issues with multipliers and into the wider public, and/or
- improving the involvement of civil society, by stimulating debate as well as initiating and fostering projects and stimulating related activities.

This capacity is clearly almost only external, with some internal aspects like agreeing on a communication strategy, and in parts also intermediate, for example when it comes to designing a consultation process.

As councils are meant to be visible bodies, it is in their interest to make the outcomes and pieces of advice available to a broader audience, in order to stimulate informed debate. The former therefore is done in all cases implicitly, as part of the wider remit, with a range of means (website, publications, newsletters etc.), with the internet also as general means to address a wider public. More explicitly councils invite (key) governmental and political actors, scientific experts, other organisations of civil society such as foundations or local agenda groups to the council and organise workshops, conferences etc. Councils try to foster high-level commitment by inviting Ministers, Parliamentarians and business leaders to internal council meetings and public events. Council members, and often predominantly the chair and director, give presentations on councils' advice and related topics

If the communication task is formulated more explicitly, councils are able to spend more capacity, to be more pro-active and to experiment with further means for political communication. Triggering engagement and snowball effects like this is the preferred means for addressing a wider public, and not by means of mass communication (for example advertisement campaigns as in commercial communication).

3. Means and actions

3.1 Advice

All councils prepare advice, on strategies, programs, policies and processes, and with this they are all involved and give recommendations on the national SD strategies, most more or less on own initiative also recommend on the EU SDS, or intend to do. This applies to both developing a strategy and progress reports and/or, for example developing indicators.

The number of pieces of advice per year depends obviously on the level of detail addressed in an advice, the broadness of the process, the capacity of a council and secretariat, and ranges overall between a few and up to 50. A variable is here, whether, and if so, how, civil society is already involved in the process of the council's advice forming: either by inviting experts, civil society, and/or by discussing a draft opinion with a wider audience. For national/regional SD strategies (and in some cases the EU SDS) governments often conduct a public consultation, which might be accompanied by a council's action, or the council stimulated this and included it for example in its contribution to the strategy development or progress reports.

Most of the councils have more emphasis on the government side, but in principle all pieces of advice are publicly available and sometimes also addressed to other actors (see ch. 4.3).

'Joint fact finding' is key when developing an advice: Besides the expertise of their own council members, councils involve more, or more specific, expert opinions and use scientific studies, in order to ensure evidence based decisions and recommendations of the council. As regards working methods, usually the secretariat prepares drafts for working group and council's plenary meetings; some councils apply a 'rapporteur'-method, i.e. one council member (the working group chair) "holds the pen".

Given the nature of SD, the integration need and better linking different policies is usually tackled in advice, as well as by triggering cross-cutting arrangements, for example inter-

ministerial working groups. Also, different policy levels are given attention in advice and organising dialogue with actors of different levels.

Setting the own agenda, i.e. deciding for the issues to deal with, is a challenge in itself: Besides the input of council members themselves "horizon scanning" or other means might be used for identifying strategic, forgotten, neglected or burning issues. Some councils "dare" to a lesser extent to putting finger in wounds, to provide a kind of stress and manage to handle it, but most are aware of this need. Learning potentials hence exist among councils (as some are, for example, dedicated to controversial issues). Not rarely, governments appreciate if a council tackles hot topics. In the end the challenge is about keeping SD highly visible, and at the same time filling it with seriousness, and both about identifying windows of opportunity and opening up the agenda. Some councils have an annual conference, whose topic – and sometimes related advice of the council – is then a selection of prime relevance.

The quality of advice is one key to gain reputation in the government ("to be heard and requested"). This applies always for the early times of a council's existence, and is usually over time expected as a matter of course. Then typically more emphasis is given to the outreach aspect to broadening the basis and adding value.

Examples

□ Priority fields of the national SDS

Councils typically address priority fields of the national SDS, assist in implementing it with recommendations covering individual topics in a wider context. Examples include:

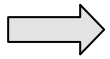
- Unsustainable Trends in Austria (2006), SD strategies in the EU and Options for Underpinning them in the National Parliaments (2006), FORUM (A);
- Seminar and report on Sustainability Impact Assessment (2006), FRDO-CFDD (B);
- World agriculture trade and SD (2003), Forest management as a model for SD (2004), More value for land use - the 30-ha goal (2004), RNE (D);
- National system of SD indicators (2005), CNADS (P); several recommendations on developing a national SD strategy, OKT (HUN) and CNADS (P);
- Mobility and the Transport Infrastructure Plan, CADS (Catalonia);
- Sustainable transport (2007), Unlocking the power sector (2007), SDC (UK).

□ Agenda setting and hot topics/contentious issues:

- Framework opinion on making mobility compatible with SD (2004), FRDO-CFDD (B);
- CSR (2006), FRDO-CFDD (B) and RNE (D);
- Perspectives of coal in a sustainable energy industry (2003), Renewables and climate goals (2001), RNE (D);
- Water management and Strategic Impact Assessment (2007), OKT (HUN);
- Sustainability in the budget (2006), Sustainability in the National Development Plan 2007-2013 - Capital investment in key sectoral areas (2006), Comhar (IRE);
- Sustainable development of tourism (2006), Willingly and knowingly (2000), RMNO (NL);
- Energy policy (2006), Transport (2005), GMOs (2005), CNADS (P);
- Decoupling (2002), Resilience (2002), Sustainable fisheries (2006), Economic growth and the environment in a global perspective (2007), MVB (S);
- The Role of Nuclear Power in a Low Carbon Economy (2006, follow-up 2007), Redefining prosperity (2003), Aviation and the environment (2003), SDC (UK).

□ Cooperating with others

- Advice together with the socio-economic council, Minaraad (B) and CNADS (P, on GMOs);
- Advice together with the Health council (2007) on nature and health, RMNO (NL);
- Seminars together with the Swedish Defense Commission, MVB (S);
- Forming a Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (SCR) as joint initiative between the National Consumer Council and the SDC, SDC (UK).



QUESTIONS:

- What are good examples for advice by councils and why? Are there criteria that can be generalized?
- Which kind of advice do you find valuable, and what could be improved?
- Is it favourable if the government is formally obliged to request advice and to justify its policy choices in light of the council's advice?
- What other ways exist to "sustain" advice? Are there experiences with following up implementation / with resuming issues covered by previous advice?

3.2 Acting as agent and facilitator

All councils act as agent, intermediary and facilitator, at least by organising debate about their work within government and society, which is usually also done by those purely established as expert councils. Very explicitly this is the key purpose for the other types of soft and mandated representation.

The results of a council's work are meant to also take an outside track via the council members, i.e. they are in principle asked to take views developed in the council to their "own" organisation, networks and "resonating room". However, only in fewer cases the potential of outreach via the council members/their organisations is systematically fostered: Council members are often not actively asked to take councils' advice to their organisations (and, for example, report back). Also the potential to stimulate activities of their organisations in light of the councils' advice/activities is not used to the possible extent.

To different extents council members "wear" this "hat" in public appearance outside the council's activities themselves. They do when giving presentations on behalf of the council, but this is often mainly done by the chair.

Regarding the involvement of other actors, councils perform their agent capacity in all kinds of directions. They

- are in more or less steady contact with relevant government departments at working level,
- invite scientists, agencies and relevant institutions to inform and to discuss their advice,
- organise briefing meetings with government officials, members of parliament, business and civil society,
- hold public events/council meetings with guests from politics, business, civil society, and other (SD) councils,
- organise vertical dialogues with different means (strategy conferences, holding council meetings in regions with invited politicians),
- hold (annual) conferences and other debate platforms with wide attendance,
- involve different Ministries in councils' projects,
- initiate redesigning research for SD,
- trigger actors not yet involved to relate to the SD agenda (e.g. media),
- might reach out beyond national and European borders and organise projects with (actors from) developing countries.

One council, the UK SDC, in addition got a wider remit as "watchdog", which implies:

- supporting the Ministries with their individual SD Action Plans, incl. capacity building (including, for example, assisting the vocational training institute),
- assessing the achievements of the Ministries,
- auditing of the Ministries' managerial SD performance (procurement, energy use...).

For this purpose the UK SDC got assigned more staff than all the other councils altogether. Clearly, this exceptional remit will develop over time and there will be some learning curve

involved. Gearing into government departments in an active and supportive way might be appealing. It is a challenge to perform this kind of direct commitment and at the same time to continue independent advisory tasks.

Organising a *peer review* is a special type of activity that strongly relates to the agent and facilitator role of a council. The RMNO just organised for the Dutch government the review of the Netherlands' SD policies/strategy and will report about its experience. The council was not only organising facilities etc., but also in charge with the entire process, including support for the selection of peer countries and peers, and identifying stakeholders to participate during the peer week, for all of which the large societal and political network of the council was helpful.

Examples

❑ Conferences, workshops and other discussions

- Facilitating stakeholder participation at the annual SD week, organised by the federal government, FRDO-CFDD (B);
- Bi-monthly lunch discussions ('milieuthemas op tafel'), Minaraad (B);
- Public seminars with the Parliament, FNCSD (FIN);
- Forums with the Academy of Sciences, OKT (HUN);
- 'Diner pensant' with industry CEOs (and other constellations), 'RMNO café' (occasional, informal event on a hot topic), RMNO (NL).

❑ Triggering the government for action

- Government launched energy-contracting as a measure to increase energy efficiency and to introduce a sustainability management of federal real estate with involvement of 70 properties (as of 2006), RNE (D);
- A pilot project on private consumption ("sustainable shopping basket") triggered a widely spread public communication by the responsible Ministry (including an advertisement campaign, local appearances on market places etc.), RNE (D);
- SD management systems in the governmental sector, MVB (S);
- Good corporate citizenship: an interactive web-based assessment model that enables any public sector organisation to account for all of its activities to be sustainable. This is now being applied to the hospital sector, and may be rolled out, SDC (UK);
- Departmental level sustainable development action plans (SDAPs) were installed by the SDS for the UK, and further fashioned by the council for the various government departments. Their prime purpose is to create a clear SD message and management structure in all government departments, SDC (UK).

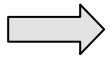
❑ Snowball effects ¹¹

- 30 ha goal of the SDS: popularising the topic of land consumption and making the need for a reduction target a political (and not only scientific) issue at different levels, by involving actors from communal, regional and national level as well as from different branches (like engineers, architects, planning consultancies...); the federal government set up issue-oriented research programmes on local solutions to reduce land consumption, on how to involve civil society in land management schemes and on sustainable forestry, RNE (D).

❑ Stimulate other actors not yet involved

- Meeting with communication departments of their member organisations to inform and assist in communicating SD in their respective channels, FRDO-CFDD (B);
- Creative workshops with TV makers; RNE (D).

¹¹ This is here meant in a basic sense of triggering activities of others. More specifically, "snowballing" has a campaign character with a whole range of different activities, bundled together in a process: branding, building up a community (incl. spending money), get others active, define points of reference, feedback mechanisms, back to politics and raise the issue again, trigger science, arts and other arenas less involved (enlarge the constituency and prevent the issue to fade away), create success stories, and communicate.

**QUESTIONS:**

- Are the activities listed above the desired ways of action? What's missing?
- Which are the most relevant target groups the councils as agents turn towards?
- What in your experience is especially valuable?
- Is the "watchdog" remit envisioned in other countries? Are there other concepts to alter or enlarge the "agent" task?
- Which formats of conferences/workshops/dialogues have shown to be successful?
- Should councils put more emphasis on this kind of activity?
- In how far are resources a problem? And/or improving professionalism?

3.3 Communication and stimulating involvement

As introduced above, communicating is inherently part of councils' activities: at least when presenting their advice, or with more emphasis when involving wider circles already when preparing advice, and when encouraging and making more use of the link of council members to their organisations and networks. Some councils put an even stronger emphasis on communication, including activities towards a wider public. Whether they do, or are able to do, relates to self-concept, remit and resources. As stated above, for around half of the councils communicating is an explicit task in their remit. With this usually comes along a higher budget, as communication is resource intensive. But also others try to extend capacity spend for communication activities. Some have developed communication concepts (e.g. the Austrian FORUM). However, there are obvious limits: the joint work in the council that must not suffer, the overall total that can be spent, the type of activities that can be paid for, etc.

In average of all, councils spend around 15-20% of their budget for communication and projects¹². Very few spend less, and several significantly more (up to 50%).¹³ Some of the higher budget category put more emphasis on the advice side (more pieces of advice and less communication) and/or own studies, which has to do with the missing explicit remit for communication, and partly also with the self-conception.

One problem was also recorded that lies in a way in the nature of the councils, or at least some of them: In the more representative model it has occurred that council members on one hand side welcome communication activities of the council, but might change their mind when the issue turns out as attractive for the own organisation, which then would like to brand it and take up the cause itself.

For addressing a wider public there is in principle the possibility of broad campaigns and/or advertising like in commercial communication. This would require massive resources, going far beyond councils' budgets. They therefore search for various other ways of political communication, which might also better serve triggering involvement and creating ownership, and snowball effects. Such projects include contests (see below).

The regular communication activities range from publication of advice (printed and electronically), maintaining a website, issuing newsletters, press releases etc. to conducting hearings, workshops, lunch debates, conferences on outcomes and upcoming topics, including experimenting with innovative means of groups' communication (open space, world café, voting and rating etc.), and aiming at media coverage for events and activities.

Presentations of council members, as well as articles and interviews, to all kind of groups and forums are also a regular means for spreading the ideas and outcomes of the council.

Special types of action, where many of the aspects of the agent capacity as well as

¹² The latter might also include commissioned studies, i.e. not communication activities in the sense addressed here.

¹³ But this also relates to the size of staff, i.e. how much support work is done in-house and how much is outsourced.

communication culminate, are projects for SD, usually called pilot or "lighthouse" projects or similar, carried out by the council itself, or a council's recommendation triggers projects by others, incl. government. Another category here is "seed money projects", i.e. those where not only or primarily communication takes place, but where additional incentives are provided. When seeking criteria for an activity to be qualified as an "SD project", experience shows common aspects like for example the integration of different issues, the addressing of non-sustainable trends, and a participatory approach. Quantified targets and indicators might be useful to make the project performance measurable.

Examples

Examples for communication beyond the regular activities as part of the agent capacity (with the emphasis on involving, also in advice) include:

❑ Other means of publications

- Postcards, calendars, feature movies, exhibitions;
- Supplementing councils' advice in journals (popular or expert), interviews and articles of council members;
- Press conferences; "PR-campaigns";
- Providing information for NGOs' websites and radio programs;
- Initiating and supporting educative websites on SD (<http://www.duurzame-info.be/>)

❑ Addressing recommendations explicitly to other actors than government

- '*Sustainable shopping basket*' for consumers, RNE (D);
- Study book '*Future perspectives of Hungary*' (to all actors), OKT (HUN);
- '*I will if you will - towards sustainable consumption*' (advice addressing deadlocks between actors and proposing ways forward), SDC (UK).

❑ Political communication: contests etc.

- Annual contests for schools/young people/seniors in essay writing, photography, graphic design and "action days", involving different media partners, with regional media coverage RNE (D).

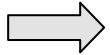
❑ Projects

- BRICS+G - Sustainability and Growth in Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa and Germany": a series of regional workshops/conferences in collaboration with the GTZ (German development aid agency), with a follow-up project on technology, RNE, (D);
- Supporting a nature conservation project, which helped farmers not to go out of business, CNADS (P);
- Backcasting dialogues with business on sustainable construction and buildings and on sustainable product chains for alimentary goods, MVB (S);
- In-depth review with the Office of Gas, Electricity Markets (OFGEM): planning better to incorporate SD into improved and more efficient regulation of the gas and electricity markets, SDC (UK);
- In-depth review on how Government policy since 1997 has helped or hindered supermarkets to deliver a more sustainable food system across the whole supply chain, and how it might enable greater sustainable development in the future, SDC (UK).

❑ Seed money projects

- Triggered by the RNE the federal government set up a two-years programme providing "seed money" for civil society projects towards SD (available for local citizens groups and LA 21 groups), totalling 2 Mio Eur. for 2 years; RNE (D);
- The Finnish government sponsors a stimulating project of key NGOs: brainstorming workshops will be followed by columns in different newspapers and periodicals as well as further stakeholder discussions; FNCSD (FIN);

- Sponsoring a small number of events and programmes run by CSOs (including at community level) and a tool-kit on sustainability for teachers; Comhar (IRE).



QUESTIONS:

- Should the task to reaching out be made more explicit? If so, does this require more resources?
- What are successful examples of communication and why?
- Which criteria should be applied to qualify a project/partnership as an 'SD project'?
- In which areas is there room for SD projects of high visibility, and how could they be promoted by civil society? Are there ways for councils to become “trendsetters”?
- In how far are resources a problem? And/or improving professionalism?
- How can media be better brought in?
- Should councils put more emphasis on communication? Can this improve SD strategy implementation?

Annex I: How to compose Councils and make them work (aspects of governance)

Composition of the councils

All advisory councils are composed to provide for inter- and transdisciplinarity, i.e. they have both members from different scientific disciplines and members with a "non-governmental" background in the broader sense (civil society and private sector). For councils where the notion of societal involvement dominates, the composition is meant to more or less "mirror" society¹⁴. "Mirror", because it is predominantly not understood in a strict representational sense. With this concept, a "multi-stakeholder" composition means societal stakeholders as members. This applies to the vast majority of advisory (SD) councils in Europe, which also have a political and institutional *independence*, i.e. a capacity to provide critical and independent advice regardless of the government's official position. Also, the desired dialogue among stakeholders that is supposed to overcome "tunnel views" etc.¹⁵ requires a space for openness, which is usually seen to be better achievable in a non-governmental setting.¹⁶

Council members (CMs) are always appointed by governments. The nomination and appointment procedures vary, ranging from public "job" advertisements and a shortlist prepared by a certain commission (e.g. NL, UK), to nominations by respective groups of CSOs (e.g. B, IRE), to a strictly Cabinet-level decision by government (e.g. Germany). The size of councils ranges from 10 to up to 50 members, with a weighted average of around 20-25. CMs typically get travel expenses reimbursed, whereas the time spent for work in and for the council is usually either covered by the home organisation or is voluntary and not compensated. Councils typically have a small secretariat supporting its activities, with staff numbers ranging from one to around 20 (the UK SD Commission being an exception with a larger remit and a larger staff).

Regarding representativeness there are different views and traditions, also in parts reflected in the nomination and appointment procedure of council members. CMs are appointed

- as representatives of CSOs¹⁷, which could be called "mandated representation";¹⁸
- ad personam, but being appointed for having a senior position in a CSO, the private sector or similar (academia is usually also included), with the idea that a CM is "allowed" to deliberate freely, but that his/her provenance is in the back of the mind, which could be called "soft representation";
- ad personam, as experts for the dimensions and aspects of SD, with some balance of provenance sought¹⁹.

The former two stand for the idea that already via the council's membership links to civil society should be provided, i.e. assuming that the CMs have a "resonating room", where ideas developed in the council may spread (see ch. 2.2 and 3.2).

Catalonia's decree for SD governance provides both for an advisory SD council (CADS) with

¹⁴ In some languages it is said (...personalities from) "public life" (e.g. German), and in others "societal middlefield" (e.g. Dutch).

¹⁵ An expression in French is "avoir le nez dans le guidon", which literally means "to have the nose on the handlebars".

¹⁶ It exists also a more negative connotation of "independence", namely that such a position leads to being too far from what is relevant for policy making ("Ivory tower", "talking shops" or similar).

¹⁷ Having members from individual companies tends to be considered odd in these cases, whilst not unusual in the others.

¹⁸ This type usually also has academic CMs, which do not "represent", and are also perceived in a way as "de-polarizing" the debate.

¹⁹ A more direct link to civil society is then often done in other ways, e.g. by installing a large "SD panel" or more or less systematically involving civil society organisations/representatives in the debate.

an expert composition and a "societal council for SD" with a CSO composition; the latter has so far not come into being. Ireland and Portugal have moved for their SD councils 'Comhar' and 'CNADS' to a more soft representational composition and style (though the number of "representatives" of certain groups is an issue). The Hungarian OKT has a three-part composition: one third from the private sector (including business associations), one third from (environmental) NGOs and one third from academia, with the chair rotating between these groups from term to term.

The German RNE is a clear example for the notion of "soft representation", similar the French CNDD. All in all, most SD councils lean to operating this way, including that council members are appointed 'ad personam'.²⁰ The developments in Belgium and the Netherlands are interesting to illustrate this. Both countries have a long-established social-economic council. The Netherlands in addition has had for long an elaborated system of policy advisory councils. Those were traditionally also set up as "stakeholder" bodies ("Polder model"), but in a reform of this system in 1997 the new, or re-established, councils were set up as expert bodies. This situation is still underlined, but over time the councils that encompass SD have appointed more societal and e.g. communication "experts". The Belgian stakeholder SD council (FRDO-CFDD) considers negotiating as a means for building trust and social cohesion. However, it the council has successfully worked over the years on shifting the internal work-style towards creating more space for deliberation.

In relation to their governments councils have to strike a balance between "not too close and not too distant", which in some countries is done by having government representatives as observers in the council. In other countries, there are other ways of steady contacts (see below). In the same way it is beneficial for the government to have a kind of "one shop one stop" for civil society views with an SD council, it is favourable for a council if there is a coordination mechanism on the government side, which is in the same way not the exclusive contact.

A special type of "council" is the government lead and/or –dominated one: These bodies are more or less a government coordination body with stakeholder involvement. The agent capacity, with civil society dialogue "among each other", and getting to joint advice, is not provided, or to a lesser extent – depending on details of the composition and the internal life, which also depends on how much Ministries steer the meetings' preparation etc. In principle, the views presented to government remain those of individual CSOs, and/or some ad-hoc overlap might occur in discussion. The conflict and compromise lines likely remain fragmented. Overall, such councils are rather a dialogue platform for CSOs and government.²¹

Having leadership for SD "at the highest level" has been concluded as probably the best arrangement at several occasions during the past years. For independent councils this is best provided if they are linked to the PM's office, which means that this office is responsible, the primary contact, and the council reports to it. A term of the council that overlaps government cycles, including the chair, is a typical means to provide for stability: It gives this (still) existing council the opportunity to make SD strong to a new incoming government.

An overview of the different types and capacities of councils is displayed in the *Annex II*.



QUESTIONS:

- What are added values of an independent council and those of a government lead/dominated ("mixed") one?
- What are options for a council design to provide for a longer-term perspective?
- How could the dialogue among civil society members be improved?

²⁰ The UK SDC tends to emphasise that members stand for 'aspects/dimensions of SD' and are not appointed as 'stakeholders'. This might relate to the Anglo-Saxon origin of "stakeholder-thinking", which tends to have the notion of lobbying of "conventional groups", i.e. large associations, in contrast to a broader variety of civil society and CSOs.

²¹ For the "independent" councils this comes on top of their work. Dialogue with government takes place in various ways: in bilateral meetings with e.g. working group chairs, by inviting operative units to certain agenda points of council meetings on a regular basis, and by steady contacts of the secretariats.

How to get to joint advice

Getting to joint positions and advice (and other decisions) lies in the heart of a council's being, and is – as elaborated above – part of the agent capacity.

In practice, there are three options to deal with controversial situations in the council (and in all similar situations where agreements are aimed at):

- The advice is dropped, or parts of it, or the whole issue is taken off the agenda: Either of this has occurred in a few cases across the countries studied;
- The smallest common denominator is agreed upon: No council chooses for this option, as it would tend to be a rather "empty" advice, whilst they strive for "meaningful" advice;
- The minority opinion is reported, usually following a vote: Only few councils so far have used this option. In those cases the number of advice endorsed this way range from a few to up to 1/3.²²

How councils perceive and handle the aim and process of "converging" shows that it is not seen as a "must" to achieve agreements, and that it is not done on the expense of the result.

At the core of an SD council is the position of council members, at least in the 'soft representation' model: In the council they have the chance and challenge to cover the span between their background and/or organisation and the demand in the council for open deliberation "beyond borders", - an opportunity that is not offered in the traditional political arm wrestling of day-to-day interest representation. This is what makes SD councils unique. A council member is allowed by its home organisation to act in this way, and with this the council member may extend and go beyond original views, but still has the organisation he/she comes from in the back of the mind and works along a subtle line of how far extension may go.

The internal process in the council faces the challenge to transform a controversial style of debate could into a mutual comprehensive learning without circumventing or fading out the contrariness of issues. A key variable for this is the capability of the chair to moderate the discussion. The council's chair is in all cases underlined as in general very important.

Another is the setting in a council meeting (and in the preparation phase): In one case council members were originally allowed to be accompanied by assistants from the home organisation. At least in this case a fundamental controversy in the council lead to a situation where council members found themselves "controlled" by their organisation. Institutional interest and positional self-interest dominated over a creative process that would have been able to produce new solution. With this dominance it was not possible to solve the gridlock on the issue and the discussion ended in dissent. The respective council was then rethinking the way of operating, and the formal arrangement was changed with good results.

In another council the academic members are asked to chair the Working Groups, which has lead to a kind of rationalising the debate. Working Groups are in general required to have more in-depth discussions and prepare a topic. A "bureau" made up of a small number of council members might be needed as steering mechanism, particularly in larger councils.

One issue handled differently is whether there is voting or not. Besides the mandated representative councils, where voting and displaying the minority opinion is normal, voting is usually provided by the internal rules, but not practiced. This is either because it has not been "needed" yet, and/or the council hesitates to really apply this means as it might move the overall style in the councils away from the original aim of finding consensus. For striking a balance, applying a "sounding vote" or a "poll" are means in practice, as well as "sounding" in case of issues beyond formal decision-making.



QUESTIONS:

- Which means are beneficial to open deliberation and "spanning" in a council?
- What is your experience with (self-)evaluation and supervision, or other training methods?

²² In some cases this is regarded as positive, as it shows the range of conflict to the government. However, it is also clear that if this occurred in the majority of cases, the relevance and added value of a council would become doubtful.

Annex II: Types and capacities of (SD) councils and similar bodies

Type	Government body		Independent (advisory) council			
Chair	PM (or Minister)		(Minister)	Independent		
Characteristics	govt. coordination body with some stakeholder involvement	govt. lead / dominated coordination body/ dialogue platform	stakeholder/ expert council	stakeholder / expert council, with a few govt. representatives as members or observers	stakeholder/ expert council	stakeholder / expert council, with watchdog/ strong monitoring capacity
Capacity						
Coordination of government departments	• • •	• • •	--	--	--	--
Address government in the council itself	• •	• • •	• • •	• •	•	•
1. <u>Advice</u> of CSOs/ stakeholders to government, comments on government proposals/SDS	• (no joint advice)	• • (no joint advice)	• • •	• • •	• • •	• • •
2. <u>Agent/ intermediary/ facilitator</u> : Dialogue of stakeholders among each other:	--	•	• •	• • •	• • •	• • •
- agenda setting	--	•	• •	• • •	• • •	• • •
- joint advice / think-tank	--	--	• • • (in working groups)	• • •	• • •	• • •
- mutual learning / capacity building	--	•	• • • (in working groups)	• • •	• • •	• • •
3. <u>Communicating</u> with multipliers and into a wider civil society:						
- via council members, by conferences/media	--	• •	• • •	• • •	• • •	• • •
- by stimulating/ fostering projects	--	(•)	(• •)	(• • •)	(• • •)	• •
	(SR)	CR, FIN	E, S	IRE, NL, P	A, B, D, F, HUN, NL, UK / Catalonia, Flanders	UK

- • • primary capacity
- • side-capacity / applies to a lesser extent
- indirect capacity (or done in addition to core tasks)
- () some do, some do less